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ABSTRACT

Over the past century, rural girls and women have increasingly taken on leadership roles in response to rural community development concerns and farm crises threatening the very existence of family farms and surrounding communities. This paper provides a brief historical overview of the status of women in rural Canada, and then describes the participation of girls and women in contemporary rural communities, with a focus on farming communities in southwestern Ontario. Case studies of rural girls' and women's involvement in 4-H clubs, Women's Institutes, Ontario Agri-Food Education Inc., and Women in Rural Economic Development (WRED) are included, with particular emphasis on the impact of WRED on the lives of rural women and their communities. WRED provides rural women with education, information, networking opportunities, and financial resources to begin and maintain small businesses. WRED strategies were tailored to meet rural women's issues, such as isolation, lack of formal education, and need for flexibility and child care. Many women in WRED are also active in Women's Institutes, hold leadership positions in local 4-H clubs, and participate in Agriculture in the Classroom programs in both rural and urban schools. They are trying not only to maintain their own rural communities and identities, but also to educate youth and urban dwellers about the important role of agriculture in all our lives. (Contains 43 references.) (TD)

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Canadian Rural Girls And Women: Preparing For The Millennium

Aniko Varpalotai, Canada

Canadian girls and women in rural communities, particularly farming communities, have experienced enormous change since the early (19th century) pioneer days of Canadian settlers (see Moodie, 1962). The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the birth of many rural organizations, including the Women's Institutes in 1897 (Ambrose, 1996), 4-H clubs for rural youth in 1915 (Lee, 1995), Ontario Agri-Food Education Inc. (OAFE), in the early 1980s, and most recently Women in Rural Economic Development (WRED), in the mid-1990s. Over the past two centuries, girls and women have increasingly taken on leadership roles in response to rural community development concerns, and a series of farm crises which threatened the very existence of the family farm and surrounding communities.

This paper will provide a brief historical overview of the status of women in rural Canada, and then will describe the participation of girls and women in contemporary rural communities, with a focus on farming communities in Southwestern Ontario. Case studies of rural girls and women's involvement in 4-H clubs, Women's Institutes, OAFE and WRED will be included in the analysis, with a particular emphasis on the impact of WRED in the lives of rural women and their communities, as they embark on the new millennium.

Women in Rural Economic Development (WRED) provides women in rural communities with education, information, networking opportunities, and financial and other resources to begin and maintain small businesses in their communities. Many of the women who are involved with WRED are also active in Women's Institutes, and hold leadership positions in their local 4-H clubs, as well as participating in Agriculture in the Classroom programs in both rural and urban schools, with the assistance of OAFE. There is an attempt not only to maintain their own rural communities and identities, but also to educate youth and urban dwellers about the important role of agriculture in all our lives.

While women have become increasingly active in public roles and strategies for sustaining rural communities, gender inequities continue, and some would argue maintain a stronger hold in the traditions of rural life, than in the more rapidly changing urban settings.

The Past

There is a growing interest in the lives and social histories of our foremothers - and recently there has been a flurry of publications bringing to life the experiences and organizations of women who pioneered and sustained the rural communities of Canada over the past 200 years. Early Canadian author Susanna Moodie's experiences of **Roughing it in the Bush** in the Port Hope and Cobourg, Ontario areas in the 1830s is among the first documented histories of early Canadian immigrants from the perspective of a woman. More recently, a biography of Susanna Moodie and her sister Catharine Parr Traill (who was also a writer) has been published (Gray, 1999). Other historical accounts which help to shed some light on the lives of rural Canadian women, include: published diaries of an early 19th century farmer's daughter in Nova Scotia (McClare, 1989), the letters of rural women living in the Western provinces during the early decades of the 20th century (Lewis, 1998), a history of farm women's organizations in Alberta in the 20th century (Langford, 1997), a comparison of the feminist politics of rural Catholic women in Quebec and France (Black & Cuthbert Brandt, 1999), agrarian feminism and the politics of Ontario farm women (Carbert, 1995), post Second World War farm women in Ontario (Cebotarev in Parr, 1995), a centennial history of the Women's Institutes in Ontario (Ambrose, 1996), as well as academic theses on the subject by Halpern (1997), Cummins (1996), and others. There are also several historical collections related to the lives of rural children in Canada, including: Lewis (1996), and Cochrane (1996), as well as histories of the 4-H clubs (Canadian 4-H Council, 1982; Lee, 1995).

A common thread through all of these historical accounts is the courage and creativity of rural girls and women, in often inhospitable and heavily gendered environments. As Dahlstrom (1996) writes in her article on young women in rural Scandinavia, "the environment and society in the periphery are gendered male" (p.263) and "rural" as a concept "has a connotation not only of traditional economic structures, but also of traditional social patterns." (p.260). Despite the hardships, and perhaps because of them, Canadian farm women have worked passionately to maintain the family, the community and their rural identities. Over time, they became increasingly politicized and organized.

The legacy of farm women

"Growing up on a farm and seeing my mother function as a co-manager of the economic union gave me a strong sense of women's abilities." (Margaret Fulton, retired President of Mount Saint Vincent University, in Finlayson, 1995:22)

> "Growing up in a farm family has also helped me in my career. Farm women tend to be strong, because they have to be." (Amy Friend, Vice-President, ATS Aerospace, in Finlayson, 1995:282)

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On the farm, both girls and boys begin their education in agriculture and rural living before they begin to walk and talk, as they accompany their parents at work each day. (See "Gathering Strength", National Film Board of Canada, 1989) In part, due to lack of organized day care, parents must have their children by their sides, as they go about their farm work. But the family farm has also, traditionally, relied on the contributions of all family members, young and old. Despite this reliance on the entire family's labour to sustain a farm, gendered roles and division of labour has been persistent, as has the subsequent 'occupational inheritance' of farm property from father to son(s) (Leckie, 1996).

As Mitchell and Troughton have argued (1999),

> The changes experienced by rural society affect members of rural communities in different ways .... fifty years ago women living in many rural areas of developed countries were all but invisible. Daily life for rural women was circumscribed by traditional roles on the farm, within the village and in the home..... the rural family was represented by the male farmer or other breadwinner, and women were seldom mentioned in research or policy regarding agriculture or other rural industry... However, alterations in society in general, including rural areas, over the last decades, and in conjunction with rural restructuring have resulted in changes in the role and status of women living in rural areas. (p. 1)

4-H Clubs: Head, Heart, Hands, Health

Social changes have been facilitated by various individuals and agencies. In rural communities, one of the most influential youth organizations has been the 4-H clubs. A rural based voluntary youth organization, 4-H clubs were initiated in Ontario in 1915, and are currently found in 80 countries around the world. Ontario, alone, had 14,545 members in 1995 (Canadian 4-H Council, 1995). 4-H clubs began when rural children lived in relative isolation, but they also reflected the gendered divisions of labour. Today, they compete with many other activities, but they have also evolved significantly, to the point that girls now make up the majority of the membership, and participate in all aspects of the increased variety of 4-H projects/clubs available to them. In the past, girls were segregated in the "homemaking" clubs, while the boys participated in a variety of agricultural activities from crops to various livestock clubs. The clubs share a hands-on learning orientation, they are led by local women and men who are themselves farmers and otherwise engaged in rural enterprises. While schools, particularly the larger, consolidated rural/urban schools, tend not to teach or engage in rural issues, 4-H continues to espouse the rural identity, the value of agriculture, and self-sufficiency. Leadership, public speaking and research are also significant components of each club. (Varpalotai, 1997)

4-H clubs, with their long history in rural communities, provide a good medium for examining the intersections between youth socialization, aspirations, and gender relations in rural communities (Varpalotai, 1996).

4-H is a rural tradition, passed on through the generations. In an earlier study on 4-H clubs in Southwestern Ontario, most of the current leaders had been 4-H members themselves, as youth. Many of them, particularly the men, were now farmers, and leading clubs in their areas of agricultural expertise. The women leaders tended to lead the former 'homemaking' clubs, now renamed and modernized as 'life skills' clubs. In theory, all clubs are co-ed., and as noted earlier, girls make up the majority of 4-H members, overall. Girls have now become active in the full range of clubs, with the notable exception of the tractor club (see also: Leckie, n.d.), boys, however, continue to gravitate towards the traditional agricultural clubs, with very few in the life skills types clubs, even though these are much more gender neutral today, and include such activities as photography, fishing, conservation, along with cooking, baking, and home crafts.

Those involved in the farm-related clubs hope that the exposure to different methods of farming will educate youth about options, new ideas, and instil a commitment to farming. In addition to the specifics of a particular aspect of farming, there are less tangible lessons to be learned: responsibility, team work, public speaking, and respect for the rural way of life. There is the ongoing worry that farming may not be economically viable for the next generation. While many of the parents interviewed privately hoped that one of their children would continue with the farm, most acknowledged that this was increasingly unlikely, and encouraged their children to follow a path of their own choosing. The children, meanwhile, expressed a great love for farm and rural life, and while few anticipated becoming farmers themselves, most wanted to remain in the community. The local community supports 4-H activities, through direct funding from the Women's Institutes and other local businesses, while farm sponsors host farm visits, and show support at Achievement Days and local fairs.

In an effort to keep 4-H, itself, viable, urban clubs have been promoted, and private funding is solicited since recent Ministry of Agriculture cutbacks have meant reduced support to 4-H. While this urban expansion is generally applauded, there is concern that the "rural" aspect of 4-H may be lost, that rather than introducing urban children to the rural way of life, 4-H may become so generic and "citified" as to lose its rural identity. But even those who live in rural communities are often not living on a farm. And this growing distance from the farm by city and rural folk alike, has many farmers worried. One outcome of this concern has been a growing network of Agriculture in the Classroom

programs, coordinated in Ontario by Ontario Agri-Food Education Inc. (OAFE).

Agriculture in the classroom

The impetus behind the formal development of Agriculture in the Classroom programs in Ontario was a group called Women for the Survival of Agriculture (Ambrose, 1996, pp. 194-195). This group was formed in 1975 in response to the economic difficulties facing farms during the recession of the 1970s, as well as to draw attention to the contributions and needs of farm women. Curriculum guidelines were developed together with the Ministries of Education and Agriculture, and presented to school groups by local farmers, very often women. This initiative brought together agricultural commodity groups, 4-H clubs and their leaders, Women's Institutes, Junior Farmers, Federations of Agriculture, and others interested in bridging this growing rural/urban gap. (Varpalotai, 1997) For even as the lines between urban and rural schools and communities were blurring with increased urbanization and the consolidation of schools and school boards, the gap in understanding between these two solitudes was widening. Some Ontario farmers lamented that "students know more about dinosaurs than they do about growing food livestock" (Mann, 1995, p. 35), while David Suzuki, noted Canadian environmental scientist, commented that: "Cities disconnect us from the seasons, the weather. We lose that sense of connection because we live in a human-created environment.... children are not even aware that every bit of nutrition that enters their body was once a living thing" (MacAdam, 1996, p. 1).

Farm youth find themselves silenced, and their farm accomplishments ignored, in large urban schools. While some make a point of informing their teachers and peers about their agricultural pursuits and successes, and devote their projects and school presentations to rural issues, others are disturbed by the persistent stereotypes of farmers and rural communities. Even within rural communities, there is ignorance and misunderstanding as farming becomes more specialized and large corporations take over previously small and family-owned and operated farms. The influx of new rural residents from the cities creates friction as the smells, dust and noise of farming operations annoy those looking for the rural idyll. Teachers in a rural setting, though often from an urban background, are urged to carefully "assess the rural outlook held by the pupils, parents and residents of your community and be sure not to let your biases and theirs to conflict, harming a potentially encouraging educational environment" (Cross & Frankcombe, 1994, p. 42) On the urban side, OAFE encourages faculties of education to introduce prospective teachers to the numerous agricultural classroom resources, available to them free of charge. These resources are funded and often produced by various agricultural commodity groups, in cooperation with a group of seconded teachers who act as curriculum advisors and workshop facilitators. OAFE also has a major presence at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto each year. Schools organize educational field trips to the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, visited annually by 40,000 students from the Toronto area. (Needles, 1997)

Rural Women: The Present

Even as these youth initiatives try to stem the tide towards a more urban-centred culture and society, rural women are encountering ongoing issues in their communities. Among the problems facing rural women are limited employment opportunities, absolute and relative isolation, lack of both public and private services (including day-care, health services, transportation, shelters for abused women....), and differences in perception of longtime rural residents and newcomers regarding the so-called 'rural idyll' (Mitchell & Troughton, 1999:2). Many studies of farm women show that despite their active involvement on the farm, very few identify themselves with the occupation of farming. There continues to be a high degree of sexual segregation of both on-farm and off-farm work, "women's work on farms was traditional, with most involved in book keeping and running errands and seeing themselves as only helpers. Farming was what their husbands did, despite their own often considerable involvement." (Ibid., p.7) Household duties, and child care, are still rarely shared, thus farm women often work two or three jobs: on farm, off farm, and domestic labour (including, housework, child care, and sometimes elder care). Younger women and girls have a different vision for themselves, unfortunately, this often entails leaving their rural community and farm. Thus, few young women aspire to become farmers themselves, farming continues to be perceived as a non-traditional occupation for women, and there are few female role models, since (as Mitchell and Troughton found) even their own mothers do not consider themselves to be farmers. (p. 11)

Nonetheless, though small in number, there are a growing number of women who identify themselves as farm operators, either independently or in partnership (Leckie, 1993). They are gaining more respect within the farming community, and, as Leckie notes, it was partially the farm 'crisis' of the late 20th Century, that began to bring some recognition and acknowledgement that without the contributions of farm women the "family farm might have been lost long ago" (p.213). Clearly, about half of the farming population is female. Yet, census data has not recognized female farmers adequately, giving primacy to legal farm ownership, deemed to be male most of the time. Still, the Canadian census has documented those women who have considered themselves to be 'farm operators', and while the actual number of both male and female farm

operators has declined in recent decades, the proportion of female farmers has risen. Thus, Leckie's research finds that in 1971, 4% of farmers in Canada were females, by 1986 they represented 5 % of all farm operators, however the numbers vary by region (British Columbia has always had the highest proportion of female farmers, 11% in 1986, while the Prairie provinces had the lowest, at 3%)(p. 217). In total numbers, Ontario and Quebec are in the lead, with 3900 female farm operators living in Ontario in 1986. By 1991, Statistics Canada found that there were just over 100,000 female farm operators, representing 26% of all farmers, with 80% of the women working in partnership with at least one other person, 10% involved in larger partnerships (3 or more) and another 10% managing a farm on their own (in comparison to 57% of male farm operators) (Statistics Canada, 1995:67). Some of the differences between male and female farm operators include marital status and age - female farmers tend to be older, and are either widows or single, and also tend to be involved in less traditional or mainstream farming, such as smaller livestock (sheep, goats, and rabbits) and horticultural enterprises, such as greenhouses.

There is speculation that the growth in female farm operators can be attributed to a growing number of married women declaring themselves as farmers due to greater social acceptance and recognition of the work they do, and more women are likely to have an education in agriculture today, than in the past when rural girls gravitated towards home economics at Guelph (see: Normand, 1995), and finally, a greater number of the men are required to work off the farm, and so major farming responsibilities have fallen to the women (though this sharing of work roles has not carried over to the domestic sphere). (Leckie, 1993, p. 218)

Many of the women farmers started out as 'hobby farmers' before expanding into large-scale operations. Women are often blocked from entering the larger enterprises, due to cost of land and equipment, as well as quotas in certain supply-managed commodities. Women tend to operate with a smaller land base, and also have a smaller income, on average, than their male counterparts. As Leckie's research (and my own) finds, "Choosing farming as a career is not something that most young girls readily think about.... in fact, the majority.... had not considered farming as a possible or suitable occupation when they were going through school" (Leckie, 1993: 222).

> For women, the gendering of access to agricultural resources starts in youth and continues, in slightly different forms, into adult life as a farmer. In particular, the women interviewed indicated there were three major kinds of agricultural resources which were particularly constrained. These were (1) resources of knowledge and expertise, (2) capital resources, and (3) resources of interpersonal networks. (Ibid., p. 225)

In Ontario, Women in Rural Economic Development (WRED) was founded to address exactly these three concerns. Though its services are open to all rural women, not just those who aspire to farm, these are concerns shared by most women who seek financial independence, as well as a fulfilling career within their rural community.

Women in Rural Economic Development

Women entrepreneurs have only recently become a subject of interest, both to women and the general public, as well as the academic community. (Murray & Ferguson, 1998) A feminist perspective on this aspect of women's work was slow to materialize, partly because "feminists have traditionally looked to unions and governments for solutions to the 'feminization of poverty' and to redress power, resource, and economic imbalances." (Canadian Woman Studies, 1994:3) . While this collection is far-reaching, there is no article, as such, on rural women. Nonetheless, there are similarities in the barriers and opportunities faced by women from all walks of life as they embark on a business of their own. For many of the women, working for themselves allows the necessary flexibility to raise a family and attend to other responsibilities, it allows them to determine the extent of their involvement, provides an element of personal control and financial independence, and "allows variation in the degree of commitment at different times in their family and life cycles." (Ibid.) This latter dimension is particularly important to farm women who are called on to do various amounts of farm work as the particular farm and season requires it. Among the difficulties shared by all women entrepreneurs, city and rural alike, are access to credit, a network of like-minded mentors and peers, and social perceptions of women's roles in their families and communities.

A more recent issue of Canadian Woman Studies on Women and Work (1998), is broader in scope, encompassing a diversity of women and their work, including unpaid work, part-time work, and work in both the public and private sectors. Once again, there is no mention of the work of rural women, in general, or farm women, in particular. Tanner's recent (American) study (1999) on "The Entrepreneurial Characteristics of Farm Women", confirms that there has been very little research on the potential of farm women as entrepreneurs (p. 11). She notes that the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), sponsored a conference in 1987 to look at the role of women in local initiatives related to job creation. The conference predicted that by the year 2000, one out of every two business owners in the United States and

Canada would be female. (p.21) Member countries' governments were urged to encourage women's initiatives with regard to entrepreneurship. While the prediction for the year 2000 may not have been fully realized, there has been a significant growth in self-employment in Canada, though women lag behind men in this regard. According to a recent study by Hughes (1999), self-employment in Canada grew from 12.3% of total employment in 1976 to 17.8% in 1997, however only 13.9% of women were self-employed, compared to 21.1% of men. The gender composition of the self-employed workforce has shifted significantly, however, with women increasing from 25% to 40% of "own account" workers (those who are self-employed and working on their own) as compared to those who are employers in small businesses, where the growth rate of women went from 11.3% in 1971 to almost 25% by 1997. (Ibid.) Despite this growth, Hughes found the quality of jobs to be highly variable in this sector, and with mixed results as to whether self-employment contributes to gender equity and emancipation for women.

Self-employment for women, in general, is clearly linked to issues of child-care and work/family balance. Many women choose this route due to their life circumstances. While it gives them the flexibility they need to balance their responsibilities, the low pay, lack of benefits, and added stresses often leave women in an even more disadvantaged position than those in the traditional workforce. Rural women, in particular, tend to be engaged in home-based businesses. These businesses are often linked to agriculture, fishing, food processing, and craft work (Song, 1999). Newer home-based businesses in agricultural communities are also agri-tourism and professional service provision, due to increased access to new technologies. While these small businesses in Canada often are intended to provide a supplementary income, in many developing countries these female-led businesses are often the mainstay of the family. (Ibid.)

The growing body of research on women entrepreneurs has consistently found that strong professional and social networks and access to education and training opportunities are essential to the success of these women and their businesses. While these supports are important for all women entering the business world, they are especially important for women in rural economic development. These support networks provide the woman business owner with business skills she feels she lacks, access to the business and life experience of those in the field longer, and emotional support (Tanner, 1999: 36-37). Tanner notes that while women entrepreneurs and rural women have been overlooked for the most part, until recently, farm women have been the least represented in historical literature: "possibly because plowing a field, slopping hogs, churning butter, making soap, emptying chamber pots, and washing work clothes were not looked upon as great achievements. These tiresome chores, however, kept many a farm business from going under" (p. 42).

Farm women's organizations were also slower to develop than more general women's organizations or general farm organizations. The Women's Institutes were a spin-off from the larger farmers' institutes. Though the original Women's Institutes were centred around homemaking skills and community service, subsequent farm women's organizations became more political with regard to rural economic development, saving the family farm, and the improvement of agriculture. (Tanner, 1999, Shackleton-Verbuyst, 1998) While Women's Institutes were sometimes criticized for reinforcing traditional gender roles for girls and women in rural communities, they also enabled women to become active in a more public sphere on issues of most concern to them. Women gained experience with public speaking, developed a social network, and began to trade skills and create products for local community fund-raisers. While today the membership of the W.I.s tends to be an older generation of women, they continue to support youth activities such as the 4-H clubs, and have arguably provided a platform for other women's groups, such as the Women's Rural Economic Development (WRED) network. Tanner suggests: "as the farm woman's horizons and involvement with their community and their world expands, their skills and experiences, both on and off the farm, are increasingly recognized as valuable personal and professional assets easily transferable to ensure success as entrepreneurs." (p. 49).

Farmers are considered to be self-employed. The literature on successful entrepreneurs indicates that they tend to come from families that are self-employed - so in some respects, entrepreneurship comes naturally to farm women. Tanner's research, as well as my own, has found that farm women are often active partners on the farm, they tend to look after the business affairs, such as the book-keeping, payroll, purchasing supplies, and other related tasks which transfer easily to other entrepreneurial enterprises (Tanner, 1999:92) Garvin & Associates (1993) in a commissioned study on the Training Needs of Canadian Farm Women, found that:

> The role of farm women has changed. The evolving attitudes and values of today's farmers have led to an emerging role for farm women; that of the managing partner. The size of the farm women's population, coupled with their management influence, necessitates that training opportunities be developed and offered to prepare them for the economic challenges of the future.

As in my own research on WRED members, Tanner found that among the characteristics of successful female

rural entrepreneurs, these women tend to be married, middle-aged, and relatively well-educated (often better than their husbands). There also seems to be a correlation to a significant number and variety of memberships in other organizations. My sample, while much smaller, has not found such a strong correlation - for about half of the WRED members I have interviewed so far, WRED is the only formal group many of them are currently involved with. This may be because traditional farm organizations have not actively recognized the role and contributions of women. But as Tanner suggests, more research is needed on the value of networks for rural women entrepreneurs. She concludes that women have tremendous potential for making a contribution to the agricultural economy in a rapidly changing world (p.97) the continuing issue is how to "foster the advancement of women as entrepreneurs and in some way foster the recognition and promotion of valuable resources to assist rural communities in current efforts to revitalize and insure a stable and prosperous future." (p.97). This is where Ontario's Women in Rural Economic Development organization becomes relevant.

Ontario's Women in Rural Economic Development organization was founded in the early/mid-1990s in response to calls for an organizational response to the needs of farm women from various existing organizations (the Ontario Farm Women's Network, Canadian Farm Women's Educational Council, and others). Conferences at both the national and provincial levels identified the training needs of women farmers/mothers who were planning to enter or return to the workforce. Many of them had served as community volunteers in the past. A number of pilot sites and community networks were created with both federal and provincial support, in order to initiate entrepreneurial training in rural communities. Individuals with adult education experience, college teaching, agricultural backgrounds, and 4-H involvement, were recruited to facilitate these early 'self-help' groups. Formal WRED training programs began in March, 1994, and the first (and continuing) Executive Director, Carol Rock, was hired that June. Rock was herself a farm woman who sought work that wasn't farm related and recognized the need for training and support for rural women who wished to become self-employed. (Helms, 1999; Rock, 1999)

WRED is a unique rural organization for Ontario women. While it met with some resistance in the production/agricultural sector, the women were very receptive to community economic development and diversification. Their male counterparts were more wedded to continued farming, in the traditional way, despite declining revenues from that sector. The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs was at first a reluctant partner, but it has since become one of the core funders of WRED's programs. Seemingly natural partners such as the Ontario Women's Directorate turned down WRED's initial funding applications because it did not fit directly with the OWD's mandate at the time to deal with violence against women issues and support for immigrant women. These early growing pains continue to characterize the challenges WRED faces in maintaining ongoing funds and resources to keep its programs going (Albert, 1998). Helms (1999:11) notes that "the novel concept of rural women training rural women brought some gaping stares back in 1993, but Rock persevered. 'Rural women have always been known for their enterprise, especially in a business such as farming, that has its well-known ups and downs'."

The WRED program was geared to rural women who had issues of isolation, access to formal training and education, need for flexibility in their schedules, child care, and other concerns to contend with which, while present in urban women's lives as well, are exacerbated for rural and farm women. WRED trained local trainers to deliver programs in various communities, develop stable networking groups in each area, and solicit sponsorships from government and private sources. Groups and programs have been formed for girls and young women, as well as adults. One model which has become popular in various parts of southwestern Ontario is the dinner and networking groups. Local coordinators organize dinner meetings on a quarterly basis, usually at community restaurants or catered by local businesses, and invite guest speakers to talk about topics of interest to rural women entrepreneurs. Between these dinner meetings, other meetings may take place where the women share issues and successes pertaining to their businesses, learning from one another in the process. These gatherings also provide an avenue to promote their businesses, practice marketing and public speaking skills, and learn about new resources, ideas, and tips from others in similar situations. WRED facilitates alliance building groups in order to bring together women with compatible businesses who might benefit from formal or informal partnerships, either through buying supplies in bulk or combining their products or services in new ways. WRED also provides one on one consultation with individual businesses to review business plans, marketing tools, etc. Perhaps one of the biggest contributions of WRED is providing start-up loans to businesses just getting underway. One of the greatest obstacles women have experienced in the past is getting bank loans and being taken seriously by mainstream financial and other organizations.

WRED is making plans to expand into northern and eastern parts of the province, including Francophone communities. There have been links to international community development agencies where projects aimed at women's economic self-sufficiency are more advanced than they have been in Canada. WRED currently involves approximately 3000 women per year

in various networks, 400-500 women take part in training programs, administered by 8 full-time staff based in a Stratford, Ontario office. The organization receives no core funding, it is all project based, which makes its work and ongoing planning somewhat tenuous. Funds for interns are provided through the Royal Bank, other funds are from various government sources, with some private sponsors. Annual funding totals approximately 1.5 million dollars. WRED maintains a resource centre, a web site and a regular newsletter. As of the 1999 Annual Report, WRED had, since it was founded in 1993, provided business development assistance to 525 women, with estimated gross sales of $10,000,000. There are over 450 new businesses operating in rural Ontario because of WRED initiatives (WRED, 1999 Annual Report, p. 2).

Among related new initiatives underway is an "Institute for Rural Women" in partnership with Guelph University. There has been recognition from both the federal Minister of Finance, and the Minister of Human Resources and Development that rural issues and community development are important to Canadian prosperity and to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor. WRED endeavours to provide greater access to capital, networking, training and mentoring for new and existing businesses established by rural women. WRED is available on an ongoing basis to groups and individuals in need of its services, advice or resources. (Bancroft, 2000)

In her study of WRED, Albert (1998) argues that the value of local entrepreneurs is just that, they are local and they "tend to be members of the community who are grounded in that community. Profits generated by a local business tend to recirculate in the local economy, rather than leave the community" (p. 59) Women who have faced inequities and barriers in mainstream workplaces are particularly attracted to starting their own businesses where they are able to maintain control, flexibility, and accommodate multiple responsibilities. While this still reflects the disproportionate demands on women, and the ongoing difficulties in having their businesses taken seriously, WRED has helped to mediate and facilitate some of these initial barriers through their programs, services and support networks. Nevertheless, Albert argues that "encouragement of women-owned businesses does not automatically address some of the inherent inequities in the economic and social spheres" (p. 68). WRED, itself, continues to face financial and geographic challenges in its efforts to help sustain rural women in their small businesses. (Ibid., p. 122-124) WRED needs to be able to keep in touch with its members, local community networks, provide and exchange information, and remain accountable to government and other funding agencies in fulfilling its mandate to address the economic needs of rural women. WRED is a multi-faceted organization, filling a niche for women who have not traditionally been heard or well represented by other organizations.

Summary and Conclusions: The Future

Among the themes cutting across all rural women's initiatives are the need to access resources of both knowledge and expertise; access to capital resources; and the need for interpersonal networks for both support and further education. Further to these is an apparent need for female role models, mentors, and leaders. Rural women have shown remarkable initiative and creativity over the past two centuries. They have risen to the challenges of constant 'multi-tasking', the rigours of farming and rural life, and the potential for new community and individual activities to help sustain their communities and their own rural identities.

There is a need for further support of these initiatives if rural communities and local enterprises are to not only survive, but thrive amidst local and global change. Rural women have made it known that they need further training related to farm business management, as these responsibilities increasingly shift to women; they also identify a need for off-farm skill development; and finally, they want personal development training in the areas of entrepreneurship, leadership and self-esteem. These need to be accessible, preferably provided in their own communities with flexible timing and other options. As computers become more common in farm homes and rural libraries, there may be greater acceptance and demand for distance delivered courses. (Garvin & Associates, 1993) But overall, women need networks of like-minded women with whom to share the trials and tribulations, successes and resources of their work experiences. Although rural women's needs (and contributions) have traditionally been overlooked, the dramatic changes affecting rural Canada have made it clear that there is an urgent need to include women as full partners in rural economic development.

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